



**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: CALIFORNIA FOCUS GROUPS ON
CAREERS IN THE ARTS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES
October 2003**

This report summarizes the findings of five focus groups that were convened to assist in the planning of two statewide forums on the topic of Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities that will be held on December 1, 2003 at the Oakland Museum of Art and December 8, 2003 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Background

The California Arts Council (CAC), in partnership with VSA Arts of California (VSA), received a grant from the National Endowment from the Arts, VSA Arts, and the National Arts and Disability Center (NADC) to convene two regional forums entitled, *Hire Value: A Focused Look at Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities*. The forums address a number of urgent topics including: infrastructure development and “lifelong learning” leading to careers in the arts, and resource development. The 23-member planning committee for the forums recommended that regional discussion groups be conducted in order to identify issues and make recommendations towards the specific activities of the forums. Five focus groups were convened by the CAC, VSA and the NADC between August 18 and September 3, 2003. This report summarizes the findings from these focus groups that took place in San Diego, Merced, Sacramento, San Francisco and Los Angeles. The information reported here is based on input from an invited group of regional participants representing artists and performers, as well as representatives from arts organizations and foundations, arts centers for people with disabilities, arts education, theater companies, dance companies, museums, rehabilitation, social security, and other disability-based organizations.

Description of Focus Groups and Participants

Each focus group discussion began with an overview of California’s *Hire Value* proposal, followed by introductions, and key questions we wanted to address. This report reviews the main points made by participants to the following questions:

- What is a career in the arts? When do you say you have a career?
- What are some of the issues faced by artists with disabilities in your local community?
- What is needed as an infrastructure to support artists?
- What should the forums address and who should attend?

There were a total of 82 focus group participants, with an average of 16 participants per group. See **Table 1** for a description of participants at each of the focus group sites.

Table 1 – Description of Focus Group Participants by Site

Meeting site	Date of meeting	Number of participants	Who participated
San Diego	Aug. 18, 2003	13	Performers with disabilities Representatives from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Arts organizations ○ California Dept. of Rehabilitation ○ Social security ○ Disability based organizations
Merced	Aug. 20, 2003	15	Performers with disabilities Representatives from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Arts organizations ○ California Dept. of Rehabilitation ○ Social Security Administration ○ Disability based organizations
Sacramento	Aug. 21, 2003	18	Representatives from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Arts organizations ○ Art centers for people with disabilities ○ Theater companies ○ Social security
San Francisco	Aug. 22, 2003	18	Artists, writers, and performers with disabilities Representatives from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Arts organizations and foundations ○ Arts centers for people with disabilities ○ Dance company ○ Education ○ Museum ○ Disability based organizations ○ Social Security Administration
Los Angeles	Sept. 3, 2003	18	Artists, arts technician, writers and performers with disabilities Representatives from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Arts organizations and foundations ○ Arts education ○ Museum ○ Independent living center ○ Theater companies ○ California Dept. of Rehabilitation ○ Social Security Administration

Findings

What is a career in the arts? When do you have one?

- When your primary commitment and identity is tied to being an artist--“I am a writer.”
- When you get paid for work in the arts
- When your work is exhibited, or you perform and you are called an artist
- When you quit your day job
- Getting awards and grants
- When you receive validation from an audience

What are some issues faced by artists with disabilities in the local community?

- Lack of public awareness about the talents and capabilities of people with disabilities, e.g., the concept that “disabled people are not supposed to dance.”
- Arts not seen as a viable career path by the service system
 - The California Department on Rehabilitation applies guidelines for determining the viability of particular careers being pursued by their clients. Often potential earnings from labor market surveys preclude rehabilitation professionals considering arts as “viable.”
 - Within the Regional Center System, art centers are “activity programs,” not vocational programs.
- There are different obstacles posed for artists depending on the art form (performing, visual arts, literary, etc.) and the specific disability of the individual artist/performer.
- Need for education, training and professional development
 - Need for sustainable funding for training/education. Person with a disability *must be better trained and more prepared to get the same job*
 - People with disabilities treated as “fragile.” “Everyone is afraid of offending us or telling us when we don’t meet qualifications.”
 - Training needs will vary depending on art form—not the same for each art discipline
 - Need for training and early exposure to the arts by youth with disabilities
 - Need for an academy for artists/performers with disabilities
- Inaccessibility of arts venues
 - Lack of ADA compliance by arts community receiving state or federal funding
 - Traditionally seen as ramps, when it’s far more than ramps--stage, interpreters; need to think about both the performer/artist and audience. “Writing may be ideal for an artist with a disability (technology, can do work on own schedule at home, etc). However, there is more to being a writer –fellowships, workshops, readings, and meeting with other writers. If every level is not accessible, you are isolated.”
 - Access to career opportunities/employment differ by disability--communication access for performers who are deaf; physical access for individuals who use wheelchairs, understanding expectations and pacing of work for individual with developmental disabilities

- Fear of disclosure. Artists question whether they should disclose their disability.
- Employment outlook
 - Lack of local funding for the arts
 - Limited opportunities for careers in theatre outside of urban centers
 - Reduced opportunities within the entertainment industry. Need for individuals with disabilities being included in diversity initiatives within the industry
 - Smaller employers concerned with cost of accommodations. “May be the most qualified person for the job, but needs of a person with a disability may exceed budget and capabilities of a small nonprofit.”
 - Negative impact of economy on people with disabilities in general
 - Fear of loss of health benefits or social security with employment
 - Technology has opened new opportunities for people with disabilities to use tools and develop viable careers, e.g., web designer
 - Self-employment is a viable option to become entrepreneurs. Need for resources, opportunities to get funding to establish business
- Fear of loss of social security benefits
 - For many, social security remains essential for the services and supports they need.
 - It is not well understood how work incentive and other programs are in sync with employment opportunities and sources of support in arts fields (fellowships, apprenticeships, sporadic employment)
- Lack of awareness about disability, art and culture

What is needed as an infrastructure to support artists with disabilities?

- Early exposure to the arts, especially through school and opportunities for life long training
- An inclusive arts community that includes a broad range of arts careers, and artists with and without disabilities. Important not to fragment arts community. Think less about labels and invest more in work and think of it as part of a larger whole.
- To spread the word that accessibility is essential and possible; elimination of architectural and attitudinal barriers
- Services and supports that address the basic living conditions of people with disabilities
- Support of prominent people in the arts community to lend their support and influence to advance career opportunities and inclusion
- Need to address stigma against the arts as well as stigma faced by people with disabilities
- A method and means to communicate with one another. Flow of information from all sources--artists, government agencies, employment opportunities and entrepreneurs
- Create public awareness about the capabilities of artists with disabilities
- Ability to financially sustain oneself as an artist
- Exposure to others and by others; opportunities for mentoring and learning about best practices.

What should the forums address?

Focus and content of December forums should:

- Provide tools for artists (marketing and business aspects of arts) to go out on their own
- Identify resources available
- Create local partners, city and county
- Inform policy makers, arts organizations, and rehabilitation specialists to issues of and work opportunities for artists with disabilities
- Give examples of successful practices and models for accessibility
- Empower artists to feel that the arts is a real choice for a career
- Create awareness of programs that support work without loss of benefits, i.e., Ticket to Work, PASS
- Address the needs of artists with varying disabilities and issues specific to working in different art forms, i.e., visual vs. performing arts
- Bring in role models to talk about their work

Who should participate in the forums?

Forum participants should include:

- Variety of disability-based organizations, such as independent living centers and regional centers
- Art centers
- Educators
- Office for Students with Disabilities at colleges/community colleges
- Social Security Administration representatives to provide technical expertise about work incentives
- Rehabilitation professionals to learn about the viability of arts careers and to inform participants of supports provided by the California Dept. of Rehabilitation
- Other representatives from federal agencies to address other issues for artists with disabilities, such as housing, transportation
- Representatives from range of arts careers, including technical and administrative careers
- Successful artists with disabilities
- Legislators involved in arts education
- Employers
- Members of the entertainment industry, such as members of the Screen Actors Guild or Media Access Office
- Heads of unions

Summary of Key Recommendations

The following summarizes the key recommendations made by focus group participants regarding the content of the forums:

1. Address how pervasive a problem it is when the arts are not accessible. Barriers to access include failure to comply with the ADA and state laws, negative attitudes and stereotypes, as well as the fact that the service systems acts as

- gatekeeper to arts education and vocational training for individuals with disabilities.
2. Discuss the range of career possibilities in the arts. Focus on what success looks like and what we are trying to accomplish. Present models of best practices and ways to get there.
 3. Address the marketing and business skills needed for individuals with disabilities to support themselves doing art; inform participants about new revenue streams and new models of practice.
 4. Network and share resources, including financial resources to support artists on a local and regional basis.
 5. Address training and educational opportunities—specific and concrete ways to train artists with disabilities. Explore ideas around the development of an academy.
 6. Address federal and state supports to advance careers--social security, vocational rehabilitation, health care, transportation, etc.
 7. Address strategies to build the capacity of local arts communities to be more inclusive of artists with disabilities. Support a dialogue that reflects the realities of the wide range of issues that specifically impact artists with disabilities, the art form in which they work, their own identities, and their membership in their communities. Look at ways that arts communities are inclusive of disability art and culture